



OXFORD PAMPHLETS ON WORLD AFFAIRS

No. 56

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BELGIUM  
AND THE WAR

BY

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1942

THE first half of this Pamphlet describes the economy and politics of Belgium before the German invasion of May 1940, discusses the problems raised by the fact that two languages are spoken, French (by the Walloons) and Dutch (by the Flemings), and traces the course of Belgian foreign policy in recent years. The second half is devoted to the events immediately leading up to the campaign of 1940, the campaign itself, and the German Occupation.

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FIRST PUBLISHED JANUARY 1942  
FIRST PUBLISHED IN INDIA MAY 1942

*Printed at the Diocesan Press, Madras, India and published by*  
**THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, Amen House, E.C.4.**

LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO  
MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS  
HUMPHREY MILFORD *Publisher to the University*

## BELGIUM AND THE WAR

### Life and Labour in Belgium

ONCE again the Belgians are amongst our allies, not only because, like ourselves, they love freedom and believe in democracy; but also because, like Great Britain, their country could not remain free if freedom were extinguished in the rest of Europe. Geographically it lies athwart the twice-chosen highway of German aggression. Its economic and social structure can remain erect only if its great natural advantages and the creative energy of its people are developed in a world which means to live and let live, and in which no monopolist power can exercise domination.

Even among the small countries of Europe, Belgium is economically one of the most highly specialized; indeed of all the countries in the world, Great Britain is the only one which devotes a greater proportion of man-power to industry and derives from it a greater proportion of its wealth. This is almost another way of saying that Belgium is the most densely populated country of the Continent. Its area is about one-twelfth less than that of Holland; its population, eight millions at the last census in 1930, was actually greater than that of Holland by about 156,000, though it was increasing less rapidly. With its surrounding suburbs, Brussels, the capital, has nearly a million inhabitants; Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi, and Liège with their suburbs each have more than four hundred thousand. From Liège to Mons is a mining district, part of the coalfield which stretches from Germany through Dutch Limburg to Northern France, with attendant industries such as glass and hardware, steelworks and railway-

shops. Newer mines are being developed in the Campine. In Ghent there are cotton-mills, while Tournai and Courtrai have an important linen manufacture. This great industrial activity did not depend on foreign capital: on the contrary, before the war, Belgium was a creditor country.

Agriculture was efficient: but it needed foreign supplies of cattle-food and, to keep up its intensive character, great quantities of imported fertilizers. It supported a smaller proportion of the population than in any other continental country, and it could not supply the nation with all the food, especially all the cereals, that it needed. In this Belgium's position was somewhat like our own in Great Britain. The great port of Antwerp handled most of the imports and exports, and also, by means of an admirable system of railways and inland waterways, traded with the neighbouring countries, especially with Northern France. Belgium is one of the three small European countries which have colonial possessions: the Congo and the adjoining mandated territory added to the trade of the country. But every item of Belgium's economic strength implied a link with the fortunes and policy of other countries: depending on food and raw materials purchased abroad, partly carried in foreign ships, and paid for by exports which met with intense foreign competition, she was at all points vulnerable to economic disturbances in the world outside.

### **Constitution and Parties**

The system of government was parliamentary democracy. It had, of course, some features peculiar to Belgium. The lower house of parliament, the Chamber of Representatives, was elected for four years by universal male suffrage; the only women who had votes were those who received them.

for special reasons connected with the last war such as the war-widows. The Senate, or upper house, was chosen partly by the provincial councils and partly by the senators themselves, but mainly by the same franchise as the Representatives. The relations between the two houses were much the same as in the United Kingdom, and the constitution generally belonged to the English type rather than the French. One of the distinctive features of Belgian public life was the great power and prestige of the municipal authorities of the larger cities. Another was that the kings took a more active and public part in politics than our own; but they were constitutional monarchs, acting on the advice of ministers responsible to the lower house of parliament.

Belgium is virtually a country of one religion: there are fewer Protestants than Jews, and the proportion of Jews is smaller than in England. The Catholic party is therefore the largest single party; but, while united on questions, such as those concerning education, which affect the Church directly, it is divided, like the Catholic parties of some other countries, into a conservative wing to which the landed aristocracy adhere, and a 'Christian democratic' wing with a programme of social reforms. The Liberals are strong among the business and professional classes, and hold, so far as anyone can in these days, the doctrines of orthodox laissez-faire economics; but, since the franchise became democratic, they have sunk in numbers far below the Belgian Labour Party and their strength has lain in ability and wealth. The Labour Party, since the last war, has been reformist and parliamentary in its methods, and vigorously opposed to the Communists, of whom a few sat in the Chamber. The balance between these three parties has been such that there have been frequent changes of government. Coalitions,

sometimes of two parties, sometimes of three, not governments of a single party, have been the rule.

### Flemings and Walloons

Party groupings and programmes followed up to this point the same lines as in other Catholic and industrial countries; but they were complicated by another question which made it necessary in every government to balance two elements of the nation. Two languages are spoken in Belgium: in the southern part of the country the prevailing language is French; in the northern part, Dutch is spoken; but in dealing with Belgium we usually call this language 'Flemish', the adjective corresponding to 'Flanders'. A definite geographical line divides these two languages: it is the line of the old Roman road from Cologne to Boulogne, running from Visé through Waterloo to Dunkirk. A small part of France is thus included in the Flemish-speaking area; and it will be seen from the map on p. ii of the cover of this pamphlet, where the language division is shown, that the parts of Belgium where British soldiers have fought in this war and the last almost all lie in the Flemish-speaking part. We often call this area Flanders, which is in strict usage the name of only one of the Flemish-speaking districts, now divided into the two provinces of East and West Flanders. The others are the provinces of Brabant and Limburg, and parts of the provinces of Antwerp and Hainaut. Brussels was long ago a Flemish-speaking town, but has now a complicated mixture of the two languages. The French-speaking Belgians are called Walloons, in Flemish *Waalsch*, which is by derivation the same as our word *Welsh*.

There are, including those who use both languages, about a million more Flemish-speaking than French-speaking

people in Belgium; but Flemish is not the language of all classes in the northern provinces.<sup>1</sup> In the large towns it is spoken chiefly by the working classes and the lower middle classes; in the country-side the landowners and well-to-do people in general speak French. There is thus a social difference, with the inevitable accompaniment of snobbishness on one side and inferiority complex on the other. The Flemings indeed have their own literature, and their literary movement in the last two generations has produced poetry and imaginative prose of very high quality; but it is written in various local dialects. There is no standard Flemish language: the language to which these dialects are related is the Dutch language. Thus Dutch (under the name of Flemish) is the language of Flemish-speaking Belgium for official purposes, for all scientific and learned purposes and for journalism.

When Belgium became independent in 1830 the Flemish language of the governed, who had no share in political life, was in a markedly unprivileged position; but a long series of parliamentary enactments, from 1873 to 1914, gradually permitted and extended its use in the law-courts, in administration and in the army. When war broke out in 1914 the chief issue still in debate was the use of the language in technical and higher education. Flemish-speaking students

<sup>1</sup> In a pamphlet like this it is impossible to explain the different degrees and kinds of bilingualism. The bare figures are given in the *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique*, 1939, pp. xxii-xxiv. There is a very good survey of the position of the French language in F. L. Schoell, *La langue française dans le monde* (1936), chapter 1. On the Flemish side it is necessary to pick out the facts from a voluminous controversial literature and no purpose would be served by giving here the titles of books in that language. One typical partisan statement, with useful statistical data, has been translated: A. van de Perre, *The Language Question in Belgium* (1919). An American work, S. B. Clough, *History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium* (1930), sketches the entire history and has a good bibliography.



went mainly to two universities, the Catholic university of Louvain and the university of Ghent, while French-speaking students went mainly to the free university of Brussels or the state university of Liège. Ghent, being also a state university, was the subject of political controversy. If it could be made more Flemish in spirit, Flanders might develop its own Flemish-speaking upper classes. This was, however, impossible without a surrender of privilege on the other side: it meant training up a body of Flemish-speaking citizens capable of filling administrative and professional positions hitherto accessible only to the French-speaking middle class.

From the early nineteenth century the Flemish movement had some of the characteristics of a nationalist movement. Racially indeed the Flemings are not a distinct nation, even if such a thing exists anywhere. There is much racial mixture. Some of the best-known Flemish authors, and some of the most active *Flamingants* (partisans of Flemish advancement), have French names, while many people with Flemish names speak only French. But some of the Flemings were influenced by the idea of race; and there was a deep antipathy in rural Flanders, one of the most devout Catholic regions of Europe, to the secularist tendencies, whether Liberal or Socialist, which showed themselves in the industrialized Walloon regions.

There has been much controversial writing about the historical and cultural affinities of the Flemings. There are strong reasons for holding that there is a Belgian civilization, with its roots deep in the past, which is neither French, nor Walloon, nor Flemish, nor Dutch, but Belgian. The painter Rubens, who spoke Flemish, was typical of it, and the poet Verhaeren, who, in spite of his Flemish name, wrote in

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French. The Flemish nationalists, however, turn their backs on this common inheritance and have eyes only for the distinctively Flemish elements in their past, except that some of them look also at the affinity of these elements with what is Dutch or German.

### The War of 1914-1918

When the Germans marched against the French in 1914 they took the short cut through Belgium and so broke the treaty which bound them to respect Belgian neutrality. In Great Britain the violation of Belgian neutrality affected public opinion decisively. The same treaty which the Germans had broken obliged us to go to the help of the Belgians. King Albert led his people in the heroic decision to resist. The Belgian army gallantly contested the German advance; but in less than three months the enemy occupied the whole of the country except a few square miles behind the inundations of the Yser. Here the King stayed with his army while his government withdrew to France, to remain there until the Germans were driven back and the war was won.

The Allies fulfilled in the Treaty of Versailles their promise to restore Belgium's independence. In the Treaty it was also agreed that she should no longer be bound, as she had been throughout her history as an independent state, to compulsory neutrality. It may seem strange that a war partly fought to vindicate this neutral status of Belgium should have ended with its abolition; but at the time it seemed mere common sense, for the old system had failed to save Belgium or to make her an effective buffer-state for France, so that it now seemed necessary to give her untrammelled sovereignty, the right to form alliances and to

concert plans for defence with such other Powers as she could trust. The Covenant of the League of Nations, which was embodied in the same Treaty, gave Belgium the new guarantees that all the states-members of the League gave to one another, and these were meant to be the foundation of a security-system under which the concept of neutrality would be obsolete, and all the states would act together against aggressors.

The Treaty also made a small alteration in the frontiers of Belgium. There were some who hoped that she might be compensated for her sufferings in the war by additions of territory; but this would have been contrary to the principle of self-determination on which, so far as was practicable, the peace-settlement was based. In the south-east, however, there was a part of the frontier which did not exactly follow national lines, and here a small piece of territory was given to Belgium, the frontier being thus improved from the point of view of defence. This district — Eupen and Malmédy — had about 60,000 inhabitants and had been given to Prussia in 1815. In parts of it German was spoken (as also in Arlon, which was already Belgian). German became the third national language of Belgium, along with French and Flemish. There was a party among the German population who wished to see these annexed territories returned to Germany; but they gave Belgian politicians far less trouble than might have been expected. It suited Germany better to bide her time, and to profess that in this direction, as in others, she had no territorial ambitions. In the general election of 1939 the pro-German party did indeed put up candidates; but they were defeated.

Several parts of the peace-settlement affected Belgium's economic life. Her war-debts were cancelled, and she

received her share of reparations outright, so that she started on the period of peace with a good prospect of restoring her prosperity. The Treaty also altered the economic position of Luxemburg. The Grand Duchy of Luxemburg adjoins Belgium to the south-east. The neighbouring Belgian province, which at one time was a part of the Grand Duchy, still has the same name, in its French form, which is somewhat confusing. The Grand Duchy had been compulsorily neutral like Belgium, but its neutralization was so complete that it was not allowed to keep an army and so could not defend itself against aggression. Its population in 1914 was only 260,000; it is now 300,000. Its importance lies in its rich deposits of iron ore and its steel industry. Before 1914 it had been included in the German customs union; but after it had been invaded and liberated, the victorious powers put an end to this arrangement, which had accentuated the economic association of Luxemburg with the coal and iron of Germany. Two years later, after abortive negotiations for an arrangement between Luxemburg and France, the Grand Duchy came into a monetary and customs union with Belgium, so that the iron of Luxemburg came into close association with the Belgian heavy industry.

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Flemish Activism

Throughout the four years of German occupation the vast majority of people, Walloons and Flemings alike, were strongly patriotic in sentiment and obstructed the invaders in every possible way. The Germans interfered in Belgian affairs far more than an occupying power is allowed by international law to do. For the most part this only added to the obstinacy of the Belgian resistance; but among the Flemish nationalists there were some who played into their

hands. The Germans took up the question of the university of Ghent and in 1916 the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg declared that the protection of Flanders against Latinization was a German war-aim. The Germans then established a certain degree of administrative separation between the two parts of the country and set up administrative bodies for Flanders with a simulacrum of authority. They were not, however, able to find men of ability or experience who were willing to sit on these bodies, and the extreme Flemish movement, which now took the name of 'Activist', was led by untried men whose qualifications were their misguided idealism and their gullibility. Some of them thought they could reconcile their action with loyalty to Belgium, and even that they were building up a *point d'appui* against Germanization; but they allowed themselves to be used as tools in the German attempts to undermine Belgian loyalty. In 1918 there also began a new extreme Flemish movement among Belgian troops at the front, which, whatever its aims, was treasonable in its methods.

When the Germans were expelled from Belgium the leaders of these movements had to be punished; their action and the punishment embittered the Flemish question. Many civil servants were deprived of their places; the ringleaders were condemned to death, but reprieved and imprisoned. The most prominent was an ex-schoolmaster, Dr. Borms. From about 1924 demands for the amnesty of political and military offenders became the emotional centre of Flemish extremist agitation, and a few extremists were elected to parliament. Many of the offenders were pardoned and restored to normal life; but the complaints continued; and in 1928 Borms, though still in prison, was elected to the Chamber by an Antwerp constituency. Meanwhile successive

governments made concessions to the Flemish movement on the old outstanding questions. After various attempts at less thorough-going solutions, the university of Ghent became completely Flemish in 1930. In the same year the use of Flemish in the army and in 1932 its use in administration were extended. The application of these laws gave rise, however, to incidents, sometimes over very trivial matters, and afforded opportunities to the extremists, whose demands for autonomy or separation threatened the harmony and the strength of the state.

### Belgium, France, and Germany

In her foreign relations after the war Belgium naturally worked closely with France, the principal military power among her late Allies, and a neighbour with which she had many ties of sympathy and common interest. During the early months after the peace-settlement the two countries had indeed some differences, especially over economic questions such as the arrangements for Luxemburg and the discriminatory duties imposed by the French on German goods transported through Antwerp; but these differences were settled to the satisfaction of Belgium, a process which began when the withdrawal of the United States from the League of Nations compelled both the French and the Belgians to make further provision for their security. For this reason in September 1920 they concluded a military agreement, and until 1936 Belgian policy, though in some respects independent and even original, on the whole conformed to that of France in both political and economic affairs.

The Flemish extremists reacted to this co-operation with France by asserting that, if a new war came, the youth of

Flanders would be sacrificed to French interests. Some of the propaganda was subsidized by the Germans, and it was supplemented, increasingly as time went on, by clumsy and hypocritical German publications in which they posed as friends of the Flemings; but, so far as it won any response, this was due not to any liking for the Germans, but to distrust of the French.

The great economic depression of the nineteen-thirties hit Belgium hard, as it was bound to do, and she had her full share of budgetary difficulties and of disputes over public finance: opinions were divided as they were everywhere else, but she stuck to the gold standard until France left it in 1936. It was in this chronic financial embarrassment that she had to face external dangers of the greatest kind, for the same depression had opened the way for the rise of the National Socialists to power in Germany. From 1932 to 1935 national defence was in the forefront of Belgian politics, but ministry after ministry grappled in vain with the problem of finding the money for a larger and better-equipped army. Meanwhile almost every change in the European situation added to the difficulty of consolidating a national policy. Belgian Catholics, not only those of conservative tendencies, saw with misgiving the 'popular fronts' in Spain and France, and the Franco-Russian alliance. German propaganda in Belgium, not confining its attentions to the Flemings, found a creature among the French-speaking population, Léon Degrelle, the leader of a new party called the Rexists, from *Christus Rex*, who appealed to those with authoritarian leanings and had some success in disguising their true intentions from their dupes.

In February 1936 a government bill for extending the period of military service was rejected. On March 17th

the Germans reoccupied the Rhineland and repudiated the Treaty of Locarno. Their troops, which had been kept miles away by the demilitarized zone, now stood along the Belgian frontier. The French and British took no action and cast about uncertainly for means to cope with the new situation. In May there was a general election in Belgium: the Flemish nationalists gained eight of the 202 seats in the Chamber, bringing their total up to sixteen; the Rexists, hitherto unrepresented, captured twenty-one. The coalition government of Catholics, Socialists, and Liberals was reconstructed and remained in office; but it was now imperative to find some way of carrying the country forward to a real solution of the problem of defence.

### **The New Foreign Policy of 1936**

The solution which the government adopted was to seek relief from the obligations of the Treaty of Locarno. That Treaty had originally bound Belgium to assist the French or the Germans if either Power attacked the other: now that it was repudiated by Germany it was in effect an alliance with France and Great Britain. The Prime Minister, M. van Zeeland, and the Foreign Minister, M. Spaak, believed that the Belgian people would make the effort necessary for defending their independence if they were assured that everything possible would be done to avoid entering a war. They would have that assurance if the choice of neutrality were again open, if they had no alliances and pursued a 'purely Belgian policy'. The government therefore expressed a wish to be relieved of the obligations of Locarno; and in the spring of 1937 the British and French ambassadors in Brussels handed in a joint Declaration in which their governments released Belgium from these obligations, but



confirmed their pledge to assist her if attacked. They also took note of Belgium's intention to defend her frontiers and to prevent the use of her territory as a base of operations by another Power, as well as of assurances she had given of fidelity to the League of Nations.

On this last point more was added later. On October 13th, 1937, Germany announced that she too was prepared to respect Belgian territory, unless Belgium took part against Germany in a conflict; and that she was 'prepared to give support' to Belgium in the event of her being attacked or invaded. Unlike the Franco-British Declaration, this German statement, so far from referring to the League of Nations, tacitly assumed that Belgium would not take part in military action against Germany under Article XVI of the Covenant. M. Spaak had announced in the Chamber that the right of passage for foreign troops could not be imposed upon Belgium without her consent. Again on March 16th, 1938, he stated that Belgium was under no obligation to permit the passage of French troops in the event of war between France and Germany arising from a German attack on Czechoslovakia. In this he was taking a line which the four small Northern Powers and Holland had taken, thus completing a process of withdrawal from the strict interpretation of the Covenant. Some small Powers, but not Belgium, had begun to move in this direction as early as 1921.

The new foreign policy was the considered choice of a coalition cabinet of the three great parties. It enabled the Belgians to reorganize their defences with that support from public opinion which is indispensable in a democratic country. Great Britain, as we have seen, made no complaint of the way in which Belgium had exercised her discretion to choose her line of policy, but from 1936 it was plain that if

there were a new European war Belgium would in all probability be neutral, and that, if her neutrality were violated, she and her guarantors would be faced by the same difficulties as in 1914, the difficulties which had been mitigated by the abolition of compulsory neutrality in 1919. From 1936, in fact, contact was no longer maintained by the Belgian General Staff with the French and British.

### The Outbreak of War

Until the day when Belgium was invaded she held to the line chosen in 1936, on the one hand strengthening herself and on the other doing what she could to dissuade the Great Powers from resorting to war. It was not easy, when all the world was rearming, to buy war materials abroad, and finance, as always, was difficult. The Catholic conservatives left the Ministry when it decided on higher taxation; and, later, a Liberal finance minister resigned on the question of deflation. None the less, fortifications were strengthened; and a partial mobilization at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938 was followed by improvements in the system of calling-up for war. Politics at home reflected the growing danger of the foreign situation. There were party divisions about the resumption of normal relations with Italy after the Abyssinian affair and with Spain. The pro-German party in Eupen was demonstrative. The Rexists and some of the Flemish extremists came under serious suspicion. The appointment of a medical man, Dr. Maertens, an ex-Activist, to the newly created Flemish Academy of Sciences caused an outbreak of resentment. The Prime Minister had to resign and his successor had even to face a general election in April 1939 over this symbolic question: the upshot was that Dr. Maertens withdrew and, after recon-

struction, the Cabinet stayed. In this election, the Flemish nationalists kept only seventeen seats and the Rexists only one. Conversations were opened in Berlin about National Socialist activities in Belgium, and stricter measures were announced for the control of aliens, political uniforms, and foreign propaganda.

During the last days of peace Belgium joined in the appeals of the other small States (the Netherlands and the Northern Powers) to the Great Powers, while at the same time mobilization was begun by gradual stages. The Germans, followed by the British and French ambassadors, reaffirmed their countries' promises to respect Belgian neutrality. The first of many economic regulations were issued for safeguarding the supplies of food, raw materials, and military requirements. Then war began in the East. The Cabinet was reconstructed on a broader basis, more places being given to the Socialists; neutrality was proclaimed, and the King, like his father before him, and in accordance with his constitutional duty, took command of the army. There is no need to mention the various incidents, such as the forcing down of British aircraft which accidentally flew through Belgian air, by which the Belgians fulfilled the duties of neutrality. It is enough to say that they did so exactly and impartially.

So long as Germany was at war and it was uncertain whether Belgium would be involved in the war or not, it was inevitable that the domestic tension, and the foreign pressures, should become more severe. The economic and financial difficulties were formidable. The heavy cost of mobilization was met by a great loan. Blockade and counter-blockade cut off much foreign commerce; the docks of Antwerp were more than half deserted; intricate negotiations

with London, Paris and Berlin were conducted to obtain permission for such imports as each belligerent Power would permit. In the new year 1940 there were strikes among the miners. Democratic Belgians were jealous of the freedom of the press, and the Government was slow to interfere with it; but the Rexists and a section of the Flemish nationalist press did all they could to foster disunity in the people and the army. As time went on, however, and as their evil intentions became clearer, more and more of their followers fell away, the Rexists in particular dwindling to a mere remnant.

Day by day the German danger was coming nearer and growing more evident. After the German conquest of Poland, the Queen of the Netherlands and King Leopold made their last attempt, by a joint offer of their 'good offices', to avert war from the West. Their offer was made on November 7th, 1939; and when they made it they had information in their hands which appeared to indicate that Holland was to be attacked at dawn on November 12th. The offer was rejected; but the incident took Belgium one stage further in declaring her intentions. M. Spaak announced that Belgium could not be indifferent to an attack on Holland; and this announcement, which was taken to mean that if Holland were attacked, Belgium too would fight, was welcomed by the great body of the nation. There were two other 'alerts' before the blow fell, one in January and another in April 1940. It is still unknown whether the Germans intended to strike and postponed their blows, or whether they merely wished it to be believed that they were coming; the Belgian public believed the danger to be genuine and showed that it meant to stand firm.

Stage by stage the Belgian military machine was put in as

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good order as finance and supply permitted. There was an army of about 600,000 men, including twenty infantry divisions, one motorized brigade and a mechanical cavalry corps. It included 46 per cent of the men between twenty and forty years of age, or eight per cent of the total population, a percentage as high as that of those mobilized in either France or Germany. The higher officers and many of the soldiers were veterans of the last war. The plan of operations had not been settled without difficulty, for it involved allowing the enemy to occupy half the national territory, and the people knew from their former bitter experience what hostile occupation meant. This sacrifice had to be made because there is no good defensive line on the eastern frontier of Belgium, and a line had to be chosen where French and British help could arrive in time. In one respect at least the Belgian preparations were admittedly incomplete: like those of other small States the air force was inadequate. In the winter of 1939-40 it was no secret that leading British authorities thought it would be wise for Belgium and other threatened States not to wait their turns in the queue for the crocodile, but to seek Franco-British aid without waiting for an act of aggression. Belgian statesmen attached greater weight to the need for preserving their own national unity, and the risk of giving the Germans an excuse to attack.

### The Campaign

The Germans did without an excuse. Before dawn on May 10th, 1940, they swooped on Holland, Belgium, Luxemburg, and France. When the German Ambassador presented himself in the morning, M. Spaak cut him short with a ringing protest, and was then given a document

declaring that resistance was useless, and that if it were offered, Belgium would risk the loss of her independence. There was no need to put this threat into writing.

About the Belgian resistance two things are clear: among the civilian population there was no serious fifth-column action; and the army carried out its plans with efficiency and vigour. Nevertheless, the resistance lasted only eighteen days. What was it that went wrong? To answer this question fully it would be necessary to describe the daily movements of five armies, and to discuss what happened in several places about which information is still incomplete; but the short answer can be given clearly. The Germans, by the use of new methods of surprise, had one unexpectedly quick success against the Belgians: on May 11th they captured the fort of Eben Emael near Maastricht and three neighbouring bridges over the Meuse. They thus got behind the Albert Canal and compelled the Belgians to withdraw to their main defensive position. Throughout the campaign the Germans were enormously superior in the air. But it was neither the local defeat near Maastricht nor German air-superiority which made the main Belgian line untenable. The British Expeditionary Force and the French army duly took up the positions allotted to them in Belgium; but in France and Holland things went badly. On May 13th the Germans broke through the French front. Then began that forward drive of the Panzer divisions which brought them to the sea. On the 14th the main Dutch army had to surrender. During these days the British and Belgian forces were retreating, fighting as they went; but in the end they were surrounded, with no chance of getting enough supplies to continue resistance by themselves. All this happened in the most densely populated country in Europe, with the civilian

population crowding the roads in a rush to escape. The Belgian troops were near exhaustion. On May 26th the British decided that no other course was open to them except evacuation, and on the 27th the Belgian command decided to ask for an armistice. At 11 p.m. that night the King in full agreement with his Chief of Staff decided to accept the German demand for unconditional surrender. Next morning he was a prisoner of war.

Could he have done otherwise? The words in which the capitulation was made known to the world early that morning in a broadcast by the French Premier, M. Reynaud, seemed to mean that he had not done his best to inform the Allied commanders of his intentions, and even that he had surrendered before his means of resistance were exhausted. No evidence has been published that would justify either of these conclusions. He might, however, have resigned the command of the army, left another commander to carry out the capitulation, and transferred himself and his government, as the Queen of Holland had done, to an Allied country. If he had chosen this course he could have fought on at the head of the free Belgians all over the world; as it is he shares the captivity of his army and his people.

### The Occupation

The German occupation of 1940 has brought even greater misery to Belgium than that of 1914. It was bound to be so, because National Socialism is a revolutionary force, and it aims at destroying all institutions, all loyalties and all social ties except its own. The mere fact of the occupation meant in itself an economic disaster of the first magnitude. Seaborne commerce practically ceased, and with it the importing of food for men or beasts and of raw materials.

It was, of course, to the interest of the Germans to get Belgian industry going again, to see that the Belgian workers had enough food to be able to work for their new masters, and to repair the ruin of the war in factories, houses, railways and inland shipping. The Germans boasted that they would confer on Belgium the benefits of the 'New Order'; but this task of restoration, even within the limits set by German cupidity, could not be carried out. Thousands of young Belgians were drafted off to work in Germany — the number is said to have reached 200,000 by September 1941. They were not all openly compelled to go; but since no unemployment benefit was given to those who refused work in Germany, in effect the many unemployed of the docks and factories had no other choice. Agriculture and transport were utterly disorganized. The winter of 1940-41 was one of want and suffering, little mitigated by the veiled compulsion of the Winter-Help organization.

The overwhelming majority of Belgians of all occupations and classes have shown that they will not allow themselves to be bullied or tricked into co-operation with the Germans. The municipal authorities have steadfastly refused to depart from their duty and many of them have been supplanted by ill-qualified intruders under German orders. The Burgomaster of Brussels, Dr. van de Meulenbroeck, the worthy successor of the great Burgomaster Max, was deprived of his office and arrested in 1941. M. Galopin, the Governor of the Société Générale, the greatest financial institution in the country, incurred the anger of the Germans for his non-co-operative attitude. Various officials have been punished for obstructing the working of German regulations. The general public has been stubbornly hostile. The German civilian administration of rationing, transport, and other



social services was inefficient in itself, and the public made it more so. Some brave men have risked their lives by cutting military telephone wires and by other acts of sabotage. Several of them have suffered the death penalty, and where those responsible have not been detected, there have been collective or vicarious punishments. The clergy, headed by the Cardinal Archbishop of Malines, have steadfastly opposed the National Socialist ideology. The patriotic and unsubdued, though largely helpless, population looks forward to the day of its deliverance by the Allies. There is also reason to believe that its patriotic feelings find expression in a high regard for the King, who, as Mr. Eden has said, 'maintains with unbroken dignity his position as a prisoner of war'.

In their attempts at disintegration the Germans have found a few supporters among the unworthy elements of the population. Only one Belgian politician belonging to any of the three great parties has collaborated with them, the Socialist de Man, an enthusiast for planning who was formerly a professor in a German university. No party activity is permitted except to the now thoroughly discredited Rexists and the Flemish nationalists. The various Flemish extremist organizations have been combined into one, of distinctly National Socialist colour, under the leadership of Staf (or Gustaf) Declercq. Degrelle is one of a handful of Belgians who have gone to serve with the German army against Russia. The Germans have given some favour and encouragement to the Flemish extremists; but the way in which they do it shows clearly that they are more anxious to make trouble between Flemings and Walloons than to give any real help to Flanders. They have appointed a commission to supervise the enforcement of the language-laws with

one Walloon member and two Flemings, both notorious extremists. Another commission is to restore to their former status, though not to the exercise of their offices, all those who were punished for co-operation with the Germans in the last war: the chairman of this is the aged Dr. Borms. Only one Flemish nationalist has received an important position: Romsee, a man of some ability, has been made secretary-general, or acting head, of the Ministry of the Interior, and the powers of this Ministry have been greatly extended. None of these measures is in the least likely to win over Flemish opinion.

From time to time the German press throws out hints about German plans for the future of Belgium. There are a number of vague suggestions — the union of Flanders with Holland, the union of the Walloons with France, home rule for Flanders in some sort of Belgian state. It would be useless to discuss them, since they are mere propaganda and they prove nothing about Germany's intentions. She has declared Eupen, Malmedy and Luxemburg annexed to the Reich: that is clear enough. One part of her 'New Order' would certainly be to ration the trade of Antwerp and the Dutch and German North Sea ports, another to bring Belgian industry under her own control. In the same way she would annex Belgium or rearrange the frontiers, if she had the chance, for her own purposes and without regard to the feelings of either Flemings or Walloons.

### **The Belgians our Allies**

Though the army surrendered, the Belgian State remained and is at war with Germany. For the time being its war-effort was, of course, completely disorganized and the

collapse of France frustrated the first efforts to renew it by re-forming Belgian armies on French soil. There was happily no doubt about the constitutional position: the King was no longer able to exercise his functions, but the Ministers had full authority to carry on the work of government. For this work, too, France very soon become impossible; and London was obviously the place to which it had to move. In the summer of 1940 M. Gutt, the Minister of Finance, and the energetic Colonial Minister, M. de Vleeschauwer, arrived there, to be joined in the autumn by the Prime Minister, M. Pierlot, and the Foreign Minister, M. Spaak. They set to work immediately on straightening out the tangled affairs of their fellow-countrymen who had escaped the enemy. In Britain there were tens of thousands of Belgian refugees, and the government not only set up effective machinery for relieving their distress, but also made them available for war-service in industry and the forces. The diamond-cutters from Antwerp are amongst the refugees who have established new export-industries here and who help to earn the foreign exchange which is so much needed. More than three thousand Belgian seamen are serving in merchant ships, not all of them Belgian ships, since nearly half the Belgian tonnage has been sunk in the course of the war. Some hundreds of Belgian fishermen are fishing from our coasts. There is a Belgian section in our Royal Navy. Conscription has been applied by their own government to Belgian citizens resident in Britain, and numbers have escaped from occupied Belgium and come here to serve in the forces, often after almost incredible wanderings and hardships. Belgian infantry, artillery and armoured units are training here. Belgian airmen have shared in the work of the R.A.F. from June 1940 onwards, and, as the lists of

decorations show, they have distinguished themselves again and again.

Behind these fighting and industrial services is the administrative effort, and this also has much to its credit. Our Belgian Allies pay their way; we do not have to help them with subsidies. They could not prevent the Vichy government handing over to the Germans the Belgian gold reserve which was sent to France for safe-keeping; but they have succeeded in detaining an equivalent amount of French gold in the United States.

### The Congo

Not the least part of the Belgian war-effort comes from Africa. The older people in Great Britain remember, vaguely enough, the grave charges of maladministration which gave the Congo Free State an ill-repute a generation ago; but it is scarcely necessary to say that these belong to a chapter of history long since closed. The Congo Free State was only in a kind of personal union with Belgium, the then King of the Belgians was its sovereign, but the very remedy by which the old evils were corrected was the annexation of the Congo by Belgium. Great economic and administrative progress has been made since that time, and in many respects the Belgians have set an example from which other colonial powers have been glad to learn.

The Belgian Congo has a native population of more than ten millions and an area of more than 900,000 square miles, largely of tropical forest, in the heart of Africa, with the Equator running through it.<sup>1</sup> The geographical position of the Congo, like that of Belgium in Europe, is international, for it is connected in one way or another with all the chief African

<sup>1</sup> See the map on p. iii of the cover of this pamphlet.

regions. On the west it has its own port of Boma, some way up the River Congo from the South Atlantic; from there a railway runs up to the capital, Leopoldville. In the south-east the mining area of the Katanga is continuous with that of Northern Rhodesia and the important town of Elizabethville is connected by railway with the distant Portuguese port of Beira on the Indian Ocean. Lake Tanganyika forms one part of the eastern boundary and the Mandated Territory of Ruanda-Urundi is the finest part of the former German East Africa. There are trade routes from the north-east down to the Nile Valley. The northern and north-western frontier is formed by rivers of which the other banks are French, while the Portuguese colony of Angola lies to the south. British, French and Portuguese territories thus march with the Belgian, and Belgium is concerned in the affairs of West, East, Central, and even South Africa.

The belligerence of Italy brought the war into Africa, and the disaster of France involved the French colonies adjacent to the Congo in danger and uncertainty. The Belgian Governor General, M. Ryckmans, with the full support of the European inhabitants of the Congo, declared for continuing the struggle in concert with Great Britain. There is no doubt that the native population, from its own point of view, appreciated the need for resisting Germany. The torpedoing of a Belgian ship by an Italian submarine brought a state of war with Italy; and this enabled the Congo to take a direct part in the African fighting as it did in 1914-18. South Africa supplemented the available equipment, and a Belgian contingent joined Sir Archibald Wavell's armies. After a first successful action against the Italians at Asosa, the Belgians took part in the advance into Abyssinia. After the capture of Gambela they were reinforced by fresh troops

## BELGIUM AND THE WAR

and in July 1941 it was to them that General Gassera surrendered at Galla Sidano with all the Italian troops to the south of the Blue Nile, fifteen thousand in number.

The Congo has thus contributed to the Allied victories in East Africa, but its contribution to the financial and economic effort is of far more than local importance. The colony is a rich source of supply. In peace-time its principal exports, in order of money value, are copper, gold, tin, diamonds, palm-oil, and coffee. There is no need to point out the importance of most of the commodities for the present war. In January 1941 two agreements were concluded, one economic and the other financial, by which the whole of the resources of the Congo were made available for the Allies. Great Britain guaranteed the purchase of large quantities of coffee and cotton in order to support the economy of the Congo, while on the other hand acquiring the materials needed for war purposes. In the financial agreement the relative values of the two currencies were fixed, and it was arranged that the whole of the surplus gold production and foreign exchange of the Congo should be sold to the Bank of England for sterling. As the Congo always has a credit balance on its foreign trade, this means that it will provide a constant flow of gold and foreign exchange for the Allied cause.

### Conclusion

In showing how Belgium came to make common cause with the other democracies, this pamphlet has mentioned some matters about which the Belgians disagreed among themselves, and some in which their policy diverged from that of Great Britain. When sensational journalists have written inaccurately and emotionally about such matters,

they are sometimes met by smooth denials that any divergences have existed, but these denials are scarcely less foolish than the original misstatements. There is no harm in disagreements as such: the democratic conception of the world is the dynamic idea that there is no true life for the community unless dissatisfaction with the existing order can find open expression, and unless divergent interests can be reconciled by free discussion. We must, however, be on our guard against allowing these differences to loom too large, for that is precisely what the propaganda of the enemy invites us to do. Wherever he can create division, mutual suspicion or distrust, he sees his advantage; it is his aim and his method to undermine loyalty, co-operation and the foundations of order and justice. It is our duty to understand how and why there have been friction and antipathy between groups or classes among ourselves and our Allies, because without understanding these impediments to our effort, we cannot overcome them; but they are small things in comparison with the issue which divides us from our enemies. On that great issue the Belgian people are with us. Even those in Belgium itself, though they are at present held down by force, have the will to win, and they will not lack the skill to strike.

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